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What Difference Will the Election Make for South Korea?

The election is likely to be more significant for the process of democratization than for government policy. The three major candidates all advocate a free market economic system, gradual steps toward peaceful reunification with North Korea, and close ties to the US. In several ways, however, the presidential election—the second since democratic reform began in 1987—will be a milestone. It will strengthen the precedent for a peaceful transfer of power under the Constitution, and it may also bring about important changes in the nature of the country's election practices and its leadership:

- This election will mark the first time in 30 years that South Korea has a president without a military background, reinforcing the civilians' control of the government.
- If the government and the security services, which have pledged to be neutral, interfere less than they have in the past, this contest could help institutionalize a higher standard of electoral fairness.
- Voters may also help ease regional animosities by bringing to power a leader who is not a native of Taegu city in North Kyongsang Province, home of South Korea's past three Presidents.

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SOUTH KOREA: Presidential Campaign Commences

Polls show Democratic Liberal Party candidate Kim Young Sam is the current frontrunner in South Korea's presidential race, but the vote probably will be close, and, with three major candidates, the winner probably will get only a plurality of the votes.

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Early polls indicate about 30 percent of the voters support Kim Young Sam. The DLP has the largest regional bases and the strongest grassroots organizations—both key factors in recent elections. Nonetheless, Kim may not be able to count on party support outside his native southeast. The DLP also has been hit by a series of defections recently; a prominent legislator quit the party last week.

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Kim Dae Jung, the Democratic Party candidate, has about 20 percent of the vote, according to several polls. His support seems solid in the southwest—in North and South Cholla Provinces and among Cholla natives in Seoul—and Kim is striving to make inroads in other areas. He is shedding his image as a leftist opposition firebrand and striving to be recognized as more than just a regional leader. He is clearly hoping for a split among DLP voters to give him the victory,

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Among the other candidates, former Hyundai Corporation Chairman Chung Ju Yung of the United People's Party trails in the polls, but he could attract votes away from Kim Young Sam, especially since several of the DLP dropouts have joined the UPP.

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Comment: The main challenge to Kim Young Sam will be to persuade DLP faction members from areas outside the southeast to campaign vigorously for him in their strongholds. In the key battleground of Seoul, Lee Jong Chan—a former DLP official and the candidate of the minor New Korea Party—may also draw votes away from Kim Young Sam.

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